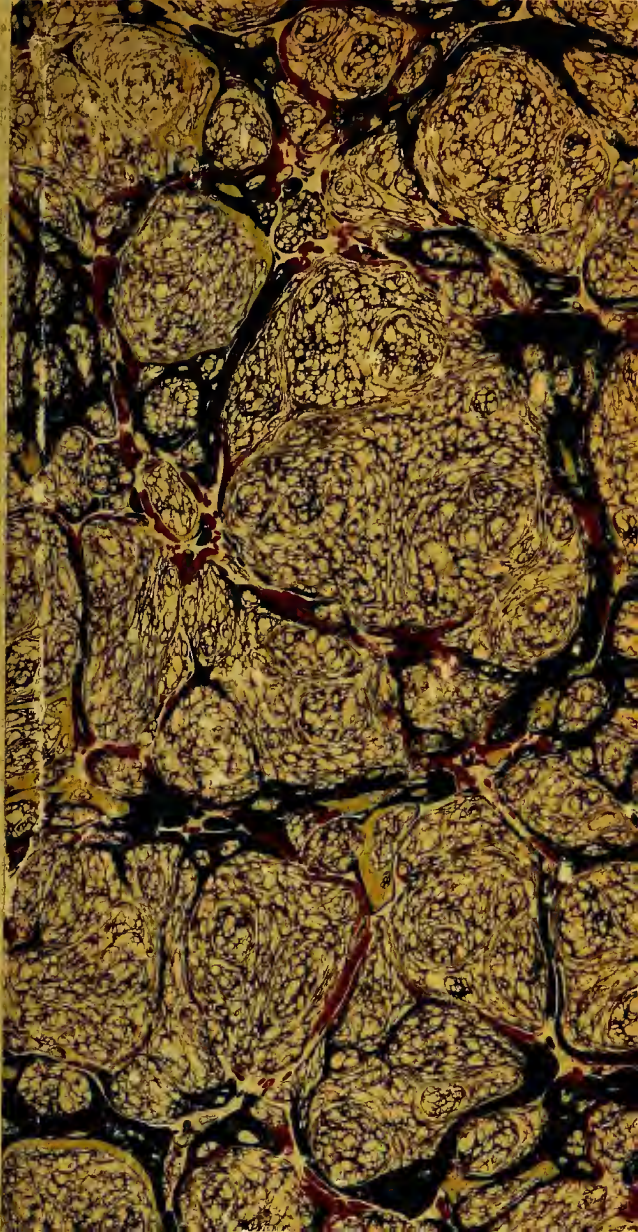


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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE
GHOST
IN
HAMLET

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GHOST IN HAMLET

BY WILLIAM STRUNK, JR., PH.D.

Hamlet holds a unique position among Shakespeare's plays by reason of the challenge which it has offered to interpretation. As a whole and in its details the play has been the subject of more discussion than any other of its author's works. The judgments passed upon Hamlet's conduct have been of the most diverse kind, and correspondingly diverse theories have been formulated to account for his delay in carrying out his task, or to disprove that such delay exists. Not a few students of the tragedy, among whom may be mentioned J. Halliwell-Phillipps (*Memoranda on Hamlet*, 1879, pp. 6-7), have after long study expressed their conviction that the mystery of the play is insoluble.

Since modern research has tended to lend support to the hypothesis that *Hamlet*, in its received form, represents Shakespeare's revision and expansion of a first draft (represented imperfectly by the First Quarto, 1603), itself a rewriting of a lost play by Thomas Kyd,

other students, of whom one of the latest is Professor C. M. Lewis (*The Genesis of Hamlet*, 1907), have frankly admitted the inconsistencies of the text, accounting for them as resulting from the presence in the play of inharmonious material retained from the original source and from Shakespeare's first version. No attempt to formulate a comprehensive explanation of Hamlet's conduct, from that of Goethe in 1795 to the latest with which I am acquainted, that of Dr. Ernest Jones (*The American Journal of Psychology*, Jan., 1910), has been generally accepted as satisfactorily accounting for everything in the play. Consciously or unconsciously, all the critics disregard some of the data. Professor Lewis, for example, deems it justifiable to disregard, in estimating Hamlet's character, such details as the sending of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their death, as Hamlet's remark about "perfect conscience," as his soliloquy on meeting the troops of Fortinbras. "The composite Hamlet is not an entity at all, and therefore not a subject for psychological analysis" (p. 133). Whether or not the reader is prepared to go quite so far as this, he will, I think, be ready to concede that the main desideratum in interpreting *Hamlet* is not to provide an answer for every difficult question that may be asked in connection with the play, but to discover, if that be possible, how Shakespeare intended his hero's

course of action to be regarded. And if the reader will concede that the data afforded by the text are partly irreconcilable,¹ he will agree that the question at once arises, which of these data are to be considered as beyond question significant.

In the opinion of the present writer, critics have hitherto, as a rule, overlooked the peculiar importance, in this connection, to be attributed to the utterances of the ghost. Nowhere have I seen it affirmed that the first step in the interpretation of *Hamlet* is to scrutinize the actions and utterances of the ghost, to note what it does and what it leaves undone, what it says and what it refrains from saying, and to regard the results of such scrutiny as the fundamental data of the play. True, in the course of the constant study to which the play has been subjected, the words of the ghost have not escaped notice, and his attitude towards Hamlet and his language have been cited in evidence of particular views. Thus Mr. Bradley says, with perfect justice (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 100), "Surely it is clear that, whatever we in the twentieth century may think about Hamlet's duty, we

¹ "Again it may be held without any improbability that, from carelessness or because he was engaged on this play for several years, Shakespeare left inconsistencies in his exhibition of the character which must prevent us from being certain of his ultimate meaning." A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 93.

are meant in the play to assume that he *ought* to have obeyed the Ghost;" and again (p. 139), "We construe the Ghost's interpretation of Hamlet's delay ('almost blunted purpose') as the truth, the dramatist's own interpretation." Dr. Francis Maurice Egan's essay (*The Ghost in Hamlet*, 1906) stands by itself as a discriminating study in which the ghost is constantly kept in the foreground. The distinction, however, which Dr. Egan draws between the exalted mission of the ghost, seeking only the salvation of Denmark and the preservation of his royal line, and Hamlet's sinful eagerness to exact vengeance by returning evil for evil, is one which I have difficulty in reading into the play. Still less can I see in this the chief concern of the play, and the cause of Hamlet's failure.

The play of *Hamlet* is characterized not merely by the presence of a supernatural being among its persons, but by the actual participation of this supernatural being in the action.² Unlike the ghost of Andrea in *The Spanish Tragedie*, a mere spectator of the mortal struggle in which his enemies perish, the ghost of Hamlet's father concerns himself practically in the scheme

² I am taking it for granted, in this paper, that the ghost is intended by Shakespeare as a genuine apparition, and not as a hallucination. This is so apparent that Professor Stoll (*The Objectivity of the Ghosts in Shakespeare, Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, N.S. xv. 203) regards it as a point not calling for demonstration. The opposite opinion has been maintained with great ingenuity

of revenge. He communicates to Hamlet information which could have reached the Prince by no other channel, he demands revenge, prescribes in part the conditions of this revenge, and reappears to reprove the instrument of his revenge for lack of zeal. His supernatural quality places his words and actions in a category by themselves, by reason of which, above and beyond all else to be found in the play, they enable us to determine the dramatist's underlying conceptions of situation and character. I purpose justifying this view, and then pointing out some of the obvious consequences, if we apply it as a working principle.

Whether or not infallibility can be attributed to the ghost, it cannot be attributed to the mortal characters of the play. Students of the play cannot agree whether certain speeches (as, "He weeps for what is done," iv. i. 27) are to be taken as truth or falsehood; whether certain of Hamlet's doubts and hesitations (as his doubt of the genuineness of the ghost, ii. ii. 628; his fear of sending his uncle to heaven, iii. iii. 74) are real or feigned or the result of self-deception. In the utterances of the char-

by N. R. D'Alfonso (*Lo Spettro dell' Amleto, Rivista Italiana di Filosofia*, anno VIII, i. 358), but his analysis simply confirms in detail what Lessing had long since pointed out in a general way (*Hamburgische Dramaturgie* xi), namely, that the circumstances of the ghost's appearance are in perfect conformity with the accepted notions of the behavior of ghosts.

acters other than the ghost, we meet frequently with conscious deceit (lying and hypocrisy, dissembling and the feigning of madness), self-deception (particularly in the case of Hamlet), and constantly with the limitations arising from fallible judgment, lack of information, or similar causes. Of the human characters, Horatio, indeed, displays honesty, sincerity, and common sense, but admirable as he is, there seems to be a general agreement that his more prosaic nature fails to understand that of Hamlet. Further, Horatio is comparatively taciturn; he largely keeps his opinions to himself. Barring his seeming disapproval of Hamlet's way with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, his tardy remonstrance in the scene at Ophelia's grave, and his attempt to dissuade Hamlet from the fencing-match, Horatio seems to be ready to acquiesce in any opinion or action of Hamlet, once the story of the ghost has been repeated to him. It would be difficult to maintain that he is intended to be Shakespeare's mouthpiece. None of the human characters in the play sees the action steadily and sees it whole.

But do these limitations apply to the ghost, a supernatural being? Is he liable to error, to prejudice? Can he deceive others, or be himself deceived? The answer is best found by examining Shakespeare's practice with regard to similar beings in other plays. We find that

in *Richard III*, in *Julius Cæsar*, in *Macbeth*, in *Cymbeline*, in *The Winter's Tale* (the oracle), the supernatural beings, however diverse their nature, are alike in certain respects. They have sources of information denied to mortals. They are free from the encumbrances of mortal frailty, and so far as they take upon themselves the responsibility of speech and action, they possess virtual infallibility. The fairies of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* make ludicrous blunders, it is true, and show a plentiful lack of wisdom, but this is a comic phantasy. In *The Tempest* again, the spirits are not free agents; it is Prospero in whom the supernatural power is really centered. But in serious actions Shakespeare regularly represents the utterances of supernatural beings, when they appear on their own initiative, as possessing two characteristics: perfect truth (though the form of the statement may be such as to mislead erring mortals), and, so far as the purpose of the speaker is concerned, sufficiency for the end proposed.

The ghost, therefore, may be regarded, within reasonable limitations, as sharing this infallibility. He has passed beyond the possibility of mortal errors of judgment; he has sources of knowledge in which mortals have no part. He returns to earth from purgatory, not from heaven, for that would be incongruous with his demand for revenge; not from hell, for that would be incompatible with Hamlet's duty to

obey him. It may be pointed out that he knows the circumstances of his murder, though he was asleep when it was committed. Though there would have been no propriety in making him omniscient and omnipotent, he is, so far as concerns his own aims, all-sufficient both in knowledge and in judgment. He may have no minute prophetic knowledge of the future, but he knows when intervention is necessary and when he may safely trust Hamlet to attain revenge without further admonition. So far as his words throw light upon the nature of Hamlet's task, upon Hamlet's character, upon the efficiency with which Hamlet performs his task, they have an authority, and must have been intended by Shakespeare to have an authority, which gives them precedence over all the other data afforded by the play. Like Hamlet, we may say, "It is an honest ghost," and "take the ghost's word for a thousand pound." The words and actions of the ghost in many cases furnish the test by which we may determine the truth or falsity of the indications afforded by the other characters in the play.

One qualification must be made. In the attempt to attach significance to all that the ghost does and says, we must not overlook the requirements of dramatic structure. I would not argue for a hidden meaning in the circumstance that instead of appearing in Hamlet's bedchamber shortly after the murder, it waits

nearly two months and then appears first to the guards without the palace. The exposition here is similar to that in *Macbeth*, the first, second, and fourth scenes of *Hamlet* fulfilling the same functions as the first three of *Macbeth*. That the scene in which Hamlet and the ghost meet may make the proper impression, Shakespeare prepares for it by scenes in which these two characters are separately presented to us. Similarly, the ghost's beckoning Hamlet away (i. iv) leads to a demonstration of his courage, part of the preliminary exposition of his character, and provides a means of temporarily removing Horatio and Marcellus, in order that the interest may be concentrated upon the ghost's revelation and upon the manner in which Hamlet receives it. Nor would I lay stress upon the ghost's insistence that Horatio and Marcellus swear upon Hamlet's sword. Mysterious and impressive as the ghostly voice from below sounds in actual performance, its effectiveness is rather theatrical than dramatic. Even Coleridge admitted that "these subterraneous speeches of the ghost are hardly defensible." Coleridge, however, undertook to demonstrate the propriety of Hamlet's own share in the scene, and Mr. Bradley (pp. 412-413) gives his reasons for accepting the part taken by the ghost as Shakespearean in spirit, and not merely condescension to the groundlings. I still believe that in the conduct of this part of the scene,

Shakespeare did not feel himself free to depart widely from his original. The four speeches of the ghost beneath the stage, resulting in Hamlet's removal from one side of the stage to the other, have their counterpart in *Fratricide Punished* (Furness ii. 125-126), and hence, in the opinion of some, were a feature of the pre-Shakespearean version. The issue of secrecy is never again raised. Marcellus is no more heard of, and Horatio is the most loyal of confidants. The first oath, "In faith, my lord, not I," was really sufficient. We can, however, see a reason why the ghost should approve of Hamlet's swearing his friends to secrecy: this indicates Hamlet's purpose of undertaking the revenge himself and of carrying it out with his own hand.

But with these minor exceptions, occasioned by the dramatic form and by the established tradition among playgoers, we may look to the words and actions of the ghost as our sole infallible guide in interpreting the play. What indications do these afford?

The ghost's command to Hamlet is threefold (Ransome, *Shakespeare's Plots*, p. 12):

If thou didst ever thy dear father love—

.....
 Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.
 But howsoever thou pursuest this act,

.....
 Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
 Against thy mother aught.

In the first place, he demands revenge. Is it too much to say that the mere fact of his demanding it is significant? Suppose the ghost had merely *told* Hamlet of the murder, what would have happened? Again, the ghost does not demand immediate revenge, nor does he specify the form. The act may be pursued as Hamlet thinks best. And to Shakespeare's audiences there could be no possible doubt as to the meaning of "revenge." Violent death, at Hamlet's hands, no more and no less, is what the ghost demands. The ingenious theory of Werder, according to which Hamlet's duty was to defer vengeance until he was in a position to convince all Denmark that it was righteously taken, finds no support in the ghost's words. As one of Werder's earliest critics, Baumgart (Furness ii. 392-393), pointed out, the ghost says nothing of unmasking the king, of bringing him to the bar of justice: "It is revenge alone that the ghost calls for, and swift revenge that Hamlet promises." The greater part of the fine-spun argument of Werder is refuted by this simple consideration. And the chief test to be applied to Hamlet's conduct throughout the play is simply, with what degree of efficiency and fidelity does he devote himself to this sacred duty.

The next point in the ghost's command is, "Taint not thy mind." This has, I think, been commonly taken to mean that in pursuing his

revenge, Hamlet is not to behave unworthily, to blemish his character, or perhaps, that he is not to destroy his good name. As Mr. Ransome puts it (p. 12), "the punishment of the murderer was to be effected in such a way that the propriety of Hamlet's conduct in the matter should be evident." According to this interpretation, Hamlet's words (v. ii. 355-356),

O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
 Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind
 me,

may be taken as uttered in distinct remembrance of the ghost's injunction. But this interpretation, which seems to lend support to the mistaken view that Hamlet must publicly demonstrate his uncle's guilt before taking vengeance upon him, I believe to be incorrect. The words, "Taint not thy mind," are immediately connected with those which follow, "Nor let thy soul contrive against thy mother aught." The reference is to the melancholy, occasioned by the disgrace of his mother's incestuous marriage, which has already brought Hamlet to the point of meditating suicide (i. ii. 131-132). This melancholy Hamlet is bidden to overcome. "Do not brood over thy griefs; do not yield to melancholy," is the true meaning of the ghost's words.³ The conjunc-

³ This is taking the word "mind" in its most natural and usual sense. The expression, "a tainted mind," would be closely similar to Spenser's expression (*Faerie Queene* iv.

tion "nor" emphasizes the close connection between this part of the command and that which follows, for it is precisely this brooding upon his mother's conduct that might lead him to seek some means of involving her in her husband's punishment. The view which these words really support is not that of Werder, but that of Mr. Bradley. They also afford another test by which to appraise Hamlet's subsequent conduct.

The prohibition of any attempt to punish his mother affords another test of Hamlet's later action, one so easy to apply that nothing further need be said here. The ghost's description of himself as

Cut off even in the blossoms of [his] sin,
Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,
No reckoning made, but sent to [his] account
With all [his] imperfections on [his] head,

indicates clearly that Hamlet's belief (III. iii. 73 ff.) in the significance of the last occupation of a man suddenly killed is not meant by Shakespeare to pass as pure folly. More will be said of this later on. I agree also with Mr. Bradley (p. 126) that "the Ghost, in fact, had more

i. vii. 4), "her wounded mind," used with reference to Britomart, who is in love with Artegall. The mind may be "tainted" by melancholy, just as it may be "wounded" by love. It also seems more likely that the ghost should be concerning himself with a matter of present importance, than with a future contingency.

reason than we suppose at first for leaving with Hamlet as his parting injunction the command, 'Remember me,' and for greeting him, on re-appearing, with the command, 'Do not forget.'"

Hamlet's conduct from the beginning of the second act is to be examined in the light of the ghost's commands, literally interpreted. His feigning of madness, I should say, may be held to be sanctioned by the ghost's expression, "howsoever thou pursuest this act." But the whole scheme of catching the conscience of the king by means of the play must be pronounced an inexcusable deviation from the path marked out for him. His recognition of the ghost as his father's spirit has been complete. The play is merely a pretext, which enables Hamlet to feel that he is doing *something* relating to his revenge, and thus to excuse himself for putting off his main task. And the result is not simple postponement, for the play catches the king's conscience in a way that Hamlet had not anticipated, and thereby creates a new obstacle to the attainment of revenge. The king is led to feel remorse and to pray. Hamlet, searching for the king in order that he may kill him, finds him at prayer, and spares his life, in order to avoid the possibility of thwarting his vengeance by sending the king to heaven. Hamlet's reasoning, however it may shock modern sensibilities, is not without a certain plausibility, and according to the

moral scheme of an Elizabethan revenge-play, would be perfectly justifiable, provided always that Hamlet were acting on his own responsibility. But Hamlet is not a free agent, and it should not be his to "reason why." To the objection that the ghost's words, "Cut off even in the blossom of my sin," imply an obligation upon Hamlet to kill his uncle in a moment of sin and thereby ensure his eternal damnation, it may be answered that the ghost had also said, "Howsoever thou pursuest this act," and that in the very next scene the ghost reproves Hamlet for his "blunted purpose," a reproof which it is natural to connect directly with Hamlet's failure to seize this particular opportunity. Further, Shakespeare makes it clear that even by his own principle, Hamlet was wrong in not accepting his chance, for this moment of apparent repentance is precisely the moment in which the king has definitely formulated his situation, and has resolved not to act as becomes a repentant man.

The ghost's reappearance should be sufficient evidence that Hamlet's conduct has not been blameless. The repetition of a supernatural command, in Hamlet's case as in that of the prophet Jonah, is proof positive that the person commanded has been remiss. The ghost's words, "I come to whet thy almost blunted purpose," are incompatible with any belief that Hamlet is a "man of action," deferring

his revenge only for reasons of necessity. It is to be noted that although the ghost bids Hamlet calm his mother, "O, step between her and her fighting soul," it does not specifically reprove Hamlet for having upbraided her, nor does it repeat the warning, "Taint not thy mind." If the ghost has nothing further to say upon these points, the reason must be that Hamlet is in need of no further exhortation. It is to be noted likewise that the ghost does not forbid Hamlet's going to England. Now it has been alleged again and again that Hamlet's departure from Denmark seems to imply an abandonment of his purpose; that he should have remained in Elsinore, because only there could his revenge be accomplished. Indeed, it is even urged that this absence from Denmark, at the critical moment of the return of Laertes, is what alone makes possible the subsequent catastrophes: the death of Laertes, of the queen, and of Hamlet himself. But the real causes of these events lie further back, in the sparing of the king at prayer and in the delays and hesitations which preceded this. The departure for England is, as it were, linked with dreadful consequences, but it is not their cause. Hamlet's fault is not that he sets out for England, but that he should have placed himself in a position which made this course necessary. The silence of the ghost should be conclusive. And the necessity of Hamlet's setting out for

England is otherwise apparent. After the killing of Polonius he is placed under guard (iv. iii. 14). His only practical course is that which he actually takes: to leave Denmark quietly with his guards, and to elude them at the first opportunity, once the shores of Denmark have been left behind.

After the third act the ghost does not reappear. The plain inference is that intervention is no longer necessary, that Hamlet's course, reckless as it may seem, particularly to those who wish, like Goethe, to conceive of him as a tender, fragile, or flower-like creature, unfitted to take risks or confront dangers, leads directly to the fulfillment of his task. He feels himself to have the caution, the strength, the resourcefulness, the courage, and the determination to accomplish his purpose. The time of irresolution and delay is past. His words to Horatio, "The interim is mine" (v. ii. 73) are those of a man confident of his mastery of the situation. If he holds a blunted foil in one hand, he holds an unbated dagger in the other. He twice refuses the poisoned cup. He is no longer the hesitating and meditative Hamlet of the second and third acts, but a Hamlet who in a school of bitter experience has learned how to overcome his own weaknesses, and has thus fitted himself for the task of overcoming his enemy. The supernatural judgment of the ghost was not at fault.

The conclusions resulting from this principle of the virtual infallibility of the ghost are in large part not new. Indeed, any comprehensive discussion of Hamlet's conduct which is wholly new can hardly escape being fantastic. My aim has been to emphasize the importance of the words and actions of the ghost as the necessary point of departure for all interpretation of the play, and within due limits, as the final authority in such interpretation. An examination of these words and actions enables us in large measure to discriminate between the conclusions derived from other data. We are enabled to conclude with certainty that Hamlet essentially is not in madness, but mad in craft; that he is not temperamentally unfit for the task assigned him, but a fit instrument of revenge; that his task does not include self-justification or the bringing of the king to public ignominy, but is limited to the attainment of vengeance, a task possible to him only when he shall first have succeeded in overcoming his inclination to melancholy and in banishing from his mind his indignation at his mother's frailty. In the second and third acts we see him fail to carry out the ghost's command, because he has not yet overcome these obstacles. But his efforts at self-mastery have so far availed that the reappearance of the ghost, aided by his own self-reproaches, makes it possible for him to advance thenceforward steadily and surely toward the

goal of his revenge. The lives that seem to be needlessly sacrificed, in the last two acts are the price of Hamlet's previous hesitation and delay. For all this, so far as I can interpret the text, we have the authority of the ghost, which, from the nature of the case, is as much as to say, we have Shakespeare's own authority.

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The importance of the ghost in Hamlet.



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